

Discourse markers in oral narrative

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Abstract

This article seeks to demonstrate that *well* and *but* function as a special sort of discourse marker (DM) in oral narratives, and that their functions within the oral narrative context follow neither from their usual meanings nor from their usual DM functions in other contexts. Instead, both *well* and *but* are keyed on participant expectations about narrative structures and storytelling procedures. Excerpts from conversational narratives will illustrate how *well* and *but* initiate and conclude narrative action, how they guide listeners back to the main sequence of narrative elements following interruptions and digressions, and how listeners can invoke *well* and *but* to re-orient the primary teller to the expected order of narrative presentation.

If, as Fraser (1990) says, discourse markers signal a sequential discourse relationship, then specifically narrative DMs provide particularly clear evidence of an independent DM function not related to any lexical meaning. The analysis of *well* and *but* in oral narrative shows that DMs enjoy specialized functions in this particular type of discourse due to its highly coded sequentiality and storytelling conventions. © 2001 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

It is the purpose of this paper to explore the specifically narrative functions of the discourse markers *well* and *but*. I hope to show that *well* and *but* fulfill particular functions in oral narrative which follow neither from the lexical senses of these two words nor from their usual discourse marker functions. Instead, the functions of both *well* and *but* in oral narrative reflect expectations about the structures and conventions of storytelling.

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Minami (1998) demonstrates that Japanese storytellers employ particular linguistic devices as specifically narrative discourse markers keyed on the verse/stanza organization of Japanese oral personal narratives. My own recent work (Norrick 1998a,b) shows that oral storytellers strategically deploy disfluencies, repetition and formulaicity to mark specific narrative elements and transitions. The research on *well* and *but* reported below represents a further step toward an account of specifically narrative functions of discourse markers.

As an initial example, consider Twain's use of *well* as a discourse marker of the intended kind to lend verisimilitude to the oral narrative technique of a traditional storyteller in 'The notorious jumping frog of Calaveras county'. After an extended introduction with several narrative digressions of its own, the teller finally introduces the story of the jumping frog as follows.

... It always makes me feel sorry when I think of that last fight of his'n, and the way it turned out.

Well, thish-yer Smiley had rat-tarriers, and chicken cocks, and tom-cats and all them kind of things, till you couldn't rest.

Twain's raconteur begins a second story exactly the same way, as his listener is leaving.

... he buttonholed me and recommenced:

"*Well*, thish-yer Smiley had a yaller one-eyed cow that didn't have no tail, ...

In these two parallel passages, *well* serves as a discourse marker signaling the beginning of a story following a digression or interruption. Transcriptions of recorded oral narratives exhibit these discourse marker functions and related ones for both *well* and *but*, as we will see below.

Discourse markers (DMs), according to Fraser (1990, 1996), are pragmatic markers which provide a commentary on the following utterance; that is they lead off an utterance and indicate how the speaker intends its basic message to relate to the prior discourse. Hence, DMs signal a sequential discourse relationship. Many DMs are ambiguous due to homophony with a lexical item representing a traditional part of speech, though their functions as DMs do not follow from the sense of the homophonous lexical items in any linear way. In the case of *well*, this would mean that the DM function is unrelated to any of the adjectival or adverbial meanings; in the case of *but*, it would mean that the DM function would not bear any necessary connection to the adversative meaning of the adverbial conjunct. DMs orient listeners, but they do not create meaning; therefore, DMs can be deleted with no loss of meaning, though the force of the utterance will be less clear. In realizing sequentially determined functions obviously distinct from the meanings of their homophonous lexical counterparts, as traditionally described, narrative DMs provide particularly clear evidence of an independent DM function.

Schourup (1985), Schiffrin (1987), Fraser (1988) and others posit a core meaning for each DM with local context explaining the range of functions. Now, the local

context includes how participants identify the type of talk exchange in progress; and storytelling is a type of talk with its own structural conventions and interactional relevance. Storytelling differs significantly from regular turn-by-turn conversation in its sequential implications, so that we might expect it to invest DMs with special organizational functions not found in other forms of talk. Past research, however, has tended to focus on the give-and-take of everyday talk. In turn-by-turn conversation, *well* at the head of a response signals hesitation due to a contribution somehow inconsistent with the foregoing discourse. When *but* initiates a response, it signals contrast or cancels some feature of the foregoing discourse. In oral storytelling, however, both *well* and *but* can introduce the initial expository section to set the action in motion as well as mark transitions to succeeding sections, including the final summary of a story. Moreover, *well* and *but* fulfill essentially the same narrative functions, despite the differences attributed to them in other types of discourse. Thus, I view them as DMs keyed on expectations about the organization of a narrative in progress.

In conversational narratives generally, *well* and *but* are oriented toward furthering the main action and formulating the point of the story. Besides initiating and concluding the narrative action, *well* and *but* can recall listener attention to the developing plot or the point of a story. Even a listener can take advantage of this narrative DM function of *well* and *but* to elicit a statement of a story's resolution or point from the primary teller, as we will see.

I will begin with a consideration of *well*, because its DM status is more obviously independent of its lexical senses, then move on to *but*, which seems more problematic, illustrating its particularly narrative DM functions more copiously.

2. *Well* as a discourse marker

As suggested by the citations from Twain above, *well* routinely fulfills discourse functions independent of its lexical meanings of 'healthy' in (1), 'admirably' in (2) and 'substantially' in (3).

- (1) Judy has not been well lately.
- (2) Judy has played well lately.
- (3) Judy is well on her way to improvement.

The usual dialogic functions identified for *well* as a DM are to preface utterances which reject, cancel or disagree with the content or tenor of the foregoing discourse (see Lakoff, 1973; Svartvik, 1980; Owen, 1983; Pomerantz, 1984; Schiffrin, 1987). In this function, *well* serves as a lefthand discourse bracket, as described by Watts (1989). According to Schourup (1985), speakers use *well* as an 'evincive', indicating that they are consulting their own thoughts and producing a response insufficient in some way. Schiffrin (1987) expresses roughly the same point in writing that *well* signals that the speaker is 'deferring' the full content of the response. Thus, *well* goes hand in hand with speaker hesitation and an implication that the

following contribution is undesirable or inadequate in some way, for instance in the direct denial in the initial conversational passage below.¹

- Jacob: Then I talked him into
writing a letter to Donna.
I knew he'd never do it,
on his own.
- Erik: Sober.
- Jacob: Yeah,
well, no,
I knew he'd just never do it,
plain, y'know, do it, on his own.

Similarly, *well* may signal rejection of a presupposition made by another speaker:

- Yvonne: Did you defeat the purpose? {laughing}
- Tom: *Well*, the purpose was,
maybe at the time just a medium.

When *well* is used by a single speaker to continue, it often introduces an explanatory comment, according to Halliday and Hasan (1976). Watts (1989: 224) describes a similar same-speaker bridging use of *well* as a 'cohesive topical link on a metalinguistic level'. In a special case of this function, *well* cancels a foregoing assertion in order to perform a self-correction, as in the excerpt below.

- Tom: Was that just last night?
No it was not,
well, yeah it was,
[I was just, I was in the mood for,]
- Sybil: [You wanted something fresh and crispy,]

Lakoff (1973) claims that a single speaker may employ *well* to signal narrative elision, as in her example:

... he asked him, "How can I get the silver screw out of my bellybutton?" *Well*, to make a long story short, the witch doctor ...

However, as Schourup (1985) points out, it is the phrase 'to make a long story short' that signals elision here, not the DM *well*. Schourup goes on to claim that *well*

¹ Unless otherwise specified, examples are cited from my own corpus of audio-taped conversation. All the stories cited in the text, along with a growing number of other transcribed conversational narratives, can be found at my website: <http://www.uni-sb.de/fak4/norrick/>
Passages from other sources have been adapted to match these conventions (see Appendix A for transcription conventions).

realizes evincive function here, signaling that the speaker is consulting uncommunicated thoughts; but this interpretation takes us no further, since it, too, is redundant given the summarizing effect of ‘to make a long story short’. More to the point is the simple recognition that *well* is oriented to the main action or point of the story in progress. Svartvik (1980) comes close to this analysis with his ‘topic shifting function’, whereby *well* closes preceding discourse and focuses on following discourse.

If we specify that the topic shift is keyed to narrative organization, then it even seems to account for *well* to introduce new stories and new episodes, as in the Twain citations above. Precisely this orientation on narrative organization makes up the central tenet of the analysis presented below. This last function comes closest to the switch marked by *well* in narratives, where the teller segues back into a story from a digression or interruption.

3. *Well* as a specifically narrative discourse marker

In this section, I will present examples of *well* in spoken narratives which go beyond the descriptions of *well* as a lexical item or DM or the non-narrative types described so far. For present purposes, we can assume that storytellers and their audiences orient themselves to a narrative framework like that proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972), according to which a narrative consists of six principal parts:

- A. An abstract which identifies the point or summarizes the action of the story;
- B. An orientation which provides general background information and describes the particular circumstances of the action;
- C. The complicating action reported in sequential order;
- D. The result or resolution of the action;
- E. A final coda to close the story, often relating it to the current context;
- F. Evaluation at various points to guide the audience to the intended point of through the narrative.

Consider first a conversational example of *well* used as an organizational DM to signal the beginning of a story. This is the same function we saw in the passages cited from Twain’s ‘Notorious jumping frog’ above.

- A: something I want to go back to.
I acquired an absolutely magnificent sewingmachine
by foul means.
Did I tell you about that?
- B: No.
- A: *Well* when I was doing freelance advertising,
the advertising agency
that I sometimes did some work for
rang me

In this passage adapted from the London-Lund Corpus (Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 84), *well* serves to introduce the first expository clause and full narrative clause of a story, following the abstract in the sense of Labov and Waletzky (1967). Once the teller gets a confirmation that the story is new to her listener, she begins the narrative proper with *well*. Far from cancelling or denying the information in the abstract, *well* carries the promised story forward. Thus, it signals a primary element of the story line, setting it off from digressions, interruptions and topical turn-by-turn talk. This same basic functional description also applies to the uses of *well* to be treated below.

Consider also how *well* can signal the beginning of a new episode, as in the passage from *Dog story* below. Notice that *well* heads up an expression of how much time has passed in order to provide a frame for the new set of complicating actions to come. (Complete transcripts of *Dog story* and all the other excerpts cited from my data base appear in Appendix B).

Tammy: So my dad crated-up these two
 beautifully little matched puppies
 and shipped them from Missouri to Florida,
 to this man.
 And reminded him,
 “be sure you chain the puppies up”.
Well about, seven eight months later,
 here those two dogs return to Missouri.

The teller Tammy employs *well* to bridge the time lapse between the shipping of the dogs and their return home. In this way, she keys *well* on the expected organization of the narrative in progress. One might claim that *well* signals a cancellation of the action in Florida and returns the listeners’ attention to Missouri, but this interpretation itself seems oriented toward the expected narrative structure of the tale being told.

In parallel fashion, *well* may be oriented toward the end of an oral narrative as a summary coda in the sense of Labov and Waletzky (1967). In the passage from *Exposing* below, Jim closes by formulating the point in a clause prefaced with *well*. The excerpt represents the final chunk of a longish story about playing doctor and patient as a child.

Pamela: It sure is nice to have a boy and a girl
 I tell you
 Teddy: Yeah, yeah.
 Jim: Yeah.
 Vera: {laughs}
 Pamela: We won’t have to show them anything.
 Jim: [Right right.]
 Vera: [That’s right.]
 Jim: Well I think y’know

here were two sisters
 who didn't have a brother
 and two brothers who didn't have a sister
 and I think the idea was an exchange of [a kind]

Vera: [You were] being an educator.

Jim: Yeah.

Well not only summarizes the point of the story from Jim's perspective, it even takes into account the comments about boy and girl siblings by Pamela and Vera, so that it can hardly be said to signal a cancellation or denial of the foregoing discourse. If we insist that *well* must express a cancellation or denial of some kind, then we can note that it ends speculations about the desirability of different-sex siblings and moves to the summary coda, and thus it represents the next step expected in the dynamic narrative organization. But this amounts to saying that the most appropriate description of *well* involves its function as a DM keyed on a narrative organization in which a coda follows the resolution of the action.

3.1. *Well to return to the main theme of a story*

Besides leading into beginnings and endings of oral narratives, *well* also regularly serves to re-establish the main story line or theme following digressions and interruptions. This function perhaps differs least from the non-narrative potential of *well* to signal hesitation and to reject, cancel or disagree with the content or tenor of the foregoing discourse, as described by earlier writers. Nevertheless, this sequential use of *well* is clearly similar to the foregoing functions described, which are keyed on dynamic narrative organization to a greater degree than on any adversative sense.

In the next example *Chipmunk*, Patricia uses *well* to move from the dialogue about who believed what back into the main story line.

Amy: it was twice.
 and the first time,
 "there's a rat in there,
 there's a big mouse in there.
 I saw it".

Marsha: {laughs}

Amy: "no, there's nothing in there".
 "yes, I *saw* it".

Marsha: I wouldn't believe her.

Patricia: *well* I went out.
 remember,
 and set the bag-
 it was a bag of *cans*.
 that was when we were looking for the golf ball,
 cause you hit the ball in the can.

Patricia's description of the events surrounding the discovery of the chipmunk serves primarily to clarify the event, rather than to cancel or reject the story as related by Amy to this point. Indeed, Patricia seems primarily concerned with recording the story's main complicating action in the sense of Labov and Waletzky. At the same time, however, Patricia cements her role as a co-narrator and makes a bid to switch the story perspective to her own. Thus, if *well* cancels anything here, it can only be Amy's perspective on the events in favor of Patricia's. From Patricia's point of view, *well* must serve to lead back into the main story following inconsequential comments by Amy and Mary, so that *well* functions here again as a DM keyed on narrative organization.

3.2. *Well from listener for problems in story organization*

Tellers can only successfully employ DMs keyed to features of narrative organization and performance, if the other participants listen for them and interpret them properly. Of course, if tellers use DMs to direct listener attention to the organization of the narrative in progress, then the other participants may also have recourse to DMs to call attention to organizational problems. In the example below, a listener does just this, invoking *well* to mark an attempt to finish up a floundering story.

In the previous example, we saw how a co-narrator employed *well* to return a story to its main complicating action. In the passage below from the story entitled *Spin out*, a listener similarly exploits the narrative DM function of *well* to formulate the point of Marsha's story and thereby produce an acceptable coda. Marsha has been telling and re-telling the story of an automobile accident from the previous night, apparently trying to work through it herself, while her mother Patricia seems to desire clear closure.

- Marsha: and then he said he was coming over.
 he said "I can't get it out of my mind".
 he said "I just keep playing it
 over and over and over in my mind".
 he said "I can't get it out".
 and he doesn't remember too much about it.
- Patricia: you never do,
 because it takes *seconds* for it to happen.
- Marsha: he- I can-
 he fought the car for a good ten, fifteen seconds
 before we lost total control.
- Patricia: well the only thing you can both say
 is thank God you're safe.
 that's all.

Patricia seems to be attempting a kind of coda with her statement 'You never do, because it takes seconds for it to happen', but Mary continues, contradicting Patricia's claims about memory and time. Then Patricia uses *well* to preface a very

final-sounding judgment, and even tacks on ‘That’s all’ to make it quite clear she intends her statement as a coda.

Thus, we have seen that listeners, too, can appeal to *well* to mark utterances addressed to the form and meaning of narratives. If *well* acts as a specifically narrative DM keyed on expectations about the organization of stories, then it is available for use by both tellers and listeners.

4. *But* as a conjunct and a discourse marker

In this section, I will first illustrate some typical ‘core’ cases of *but* in its connective and contrastive uses, in order to set the stage for my description of its specifically narrative functions. As a contrastive adverbial conjunct in the terminology of Quirk et al. (1985) or an ‘adversative conjunctive element’ in that of Halliday and Hasan (1976), *but* has a range of meanings variously described as adversative or antithetic, as in (4), concessive, as in (5), corrective or replacive, as in (6), and dismissive, as in (7).

- (4) Judy expected to win gold, but got only silver.
- (5) She had little chance of winning, but it was worth a try.
- (6) Judy didn’t exactly fall down, but she tripped.
- (7) Judy was quite disappointed, but it doesn’t matter.

In its clear DM functions, *but* signals contrast or a ‘denial of expectations’ (Foolen, 1991). The contrast may be lexically expressed, as in (8), or it may be inferred from the content of the preceding discourse, as in (9).

- (8) Larry is big. But his daughter is small.
- (9) Larry is big. But he’s not good at basketball.

Dascal and Katriel (1977) and Katriel and Dascal (1984) describe the function of *but* as cancelling some level of meaning in the foregoing utterance. As Bell (1998) shows, the levels of meaning may be ideational, rhetorical or sequential; indeed, *but* may cancel meaning in the previous utterance on more than one of these levels at once. Thus, the function of *but* in the passage below could arguably be both ideational and rhetorical: ideational in shifting from Astrid to her husband Keith, and rhetorical in switching the topic of conversation from greeting Astrid to seeing Keith waiting tables.

- Brianne: Did Astrid say hi to you
or anything like that?
Addie: No, I kind of avoided her
and she didn’t see me.
But he was there, serv-
Keith was serving.

The notion that *but* cancels meanings developed in the preceding discourse provides a natural explanation for the next passage, again adapted from Svartvik and Quirk (1980: 664). Here the speaker uses *but* to cancel the contradiction he has produced and to clear the way for his rather lengthy clarification, apparently prodded by his hearer's repeated questioning.

B: it was in the middle of this Dubrovnik Garden.
which is a very overgrown kind of a garden.
I mean it's not overgrown.

A: Yeah?

B: *but* things start off.
with plenty of space between them.
on the ground.

A: Yes?

B: but when they get up to the sort of foliage level.

A: {laughs}

B: they're all sort of interlinked.

Notice that *but* serves to cancel out the contradiction as a whole. It certainly does not cancel the immediately preceding statement that 'it's not overgrown', which in fact jibes with the assertion of 'plenty of space'. Of course, this latter assertion redundantly cancels the initial claim that the garden is overgrown, which was already denied in the second half of the contradiction. Thus the force of *but* here must be to cancel the contradiction, preparing the way for some sort of resolution.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) further identify an 'internal' adversative meaning 'contrary to expectation' directed at the ongoing communication process. Similar is Schifffrin's (1987) description of a 'speaker-return' from secondary to primary information, or alternatively to cancel the topic domain of the foregoing discourse in favor of a new perspective. Bell (1998) calls this function of *but* sequentially contrastive, saying that it cancels expectations about what should come next in the discourse. In this sequential function, *but* marks off a digression or other subordinate section of a discourse and signals a return to its main topic or point, as in the following example from Bell (1998: 530).

Suddenly, his telephone is ringing with producers
interested in his next project.
But what most delights him
is that Americans will see his film.

The function of *but* to signal a shift in voice here and to segue into a new perspective is similar to the particularly narrative functions I will identify for *but* below. In both cases, *but* as a DM is keyed to the organization of the ongoing discourse.

5. *But* as a specifically narrative discourse marker

I will proceed here as in the description of narrative DM functions of *well*, citing examples of *but* in spoken narratives which do not fit the descriptions of *but* as a contrastive adverbial conjunct or DM. Again assuming that storytellers and their audiences orient themselves to a Labovian narrative framework, let us consider an excerpt (from Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 16–17, 23–27), where *but* introduces the first expository clause in a story, immediately following the abstract. Once the teller has established the background for his story with a general frame ‘I was in the boy scouts at the time’ and a particular frame for the action ‘we was doing the 50-yard dash, racing’, he begins the orientation with a clause introduced by *but*.

yeh I was in the boy scouts at the time
and we was doing the 50-yard dash
racing
but we was at the pier, marked off
and so we was doing the 50-yard dash
there was about eight or ten of us, you know,
going down, coming back

Far from expressing contrast of any kind or canceling the background information in the preceding clauses, *but* instead ratifies and builds on this information. *But* seems to fulfill our expectations of where a swimming race would take place rather than to deny them. Nor, in this narrative context, can *but* establish a contrast between a digression or other subordinate section of a discourse and its main topic or point, as Halliday and Hasan (1976), Schifffrin (1987) and Bell (1998) require for sequential contrast.

The simplest description of *but* in the passage above is that it is keyed on the narrative structure in which an orientation follows an initial abstract, so that it marks the next step in the narrative structure. Like *well*, *but* functions as a specialized organizational DM in the context of the oral narrative. If the description absolutely must contain some notion of contrast or adversity for purposes of consistency, we might say that the use of *but* in this way conveys the contrastive information that the completed prefatory abstract must give way to the initial exposition of the narrative in the orientation.

For a second example of *but* used as an organizational DM to begin a story, consider the passage below – again adapted from Svartvik and Quirk (1980: 343) – in which *but* segues from the orientation section to the main complicating action of a conversational narrative.

B: And they were
I think because of the disgrace of it all,
they were going to move to Spain
where they'd built themself
this grand house in Spain.

But apparently
 you uh they spent uh when it was finished
 they went out there to spend a winter there
 and they found they were so bored
 cos all the other English people
 did nothing but play golf and uh drink

A: m

B: that they came back after a month.

They said “Well it’s all right for a a winter holiday”,
 cos they’re very active people

Following the background information about the family disgrace and the house in Spain, *but* introduces the first attempt at a genuine narrative clause with *spent*. Although the teller breaks off and reformulates the whole initial clause, the complicating action finally begins to move and the story takes shape.

Here again *but* lacks any obvious adversative, contrastive or cancellative force. Instead, it represents the obvious next step expected in the dynamic narrative organization; and again the most appropriate description of *but* must be in terms of its function as a DM keyed on the narrative structure in which the complicating action follows an orientation section.

As was the case for *well*, *but* can be directed toward the end of an oral narrative as a summary coda. Consider as evidence the passage from *Spade* below, representing the last third of a conversational narrative, which Woody closes by formulating the humorous point in a clause initiated by *but um*. The extension of *but* in this function as *but um* or *but uh* is fairly common in the oral narrative data I have investigated. In extending *but*, tellers perhaps seek to augment the length and significance of the DM.

Woody: he had to have been twenty-five thirty yards away,
 and Paul w- went back with the shovel,
 hurled it.

I mean y’know just threw it.

Grant, Ginger: {laugh}

Woody: and I mean what is the likelihood of that thing-
 that damn shovel came right down on [his head.]

Grant, Ginger: {laugh}

Woody: I mean- I mean it came down and it flattened him.

{Woody punctuates with hand clap}

I mean he fell flat on the ground.

I mean he had a rip in the back of his head,

Grant: o-oh

Woody: and he thought he was dead.

and of course he wasn’t.

he was just knocked-out a little bit

and had a nasty concussion

and so on and so forth.

but um, I mean
 who would have thought that that shovel
 and that boy
 would have connected at that distance.

Now, certainly a formulation of the main point or summary of a foregoing narrative cannot express contrast or cancellation in any normal sense. Halliday and Hasan (1976) could perhaps identify a meaning ‘contrary to expectation’ at the particular point reached in the text, though a coda is precisely what we should expect according to Labov and Waletzky. Schiffrin (1987) might argue that this use of *but* presents a functional contrast and “creates an anaphoric tie” (1987: 165) to an earlier point in the text. Similarly, Bell (1998) might say, following Dascal and Katriel (1977) and Katriel and Dascal (1984), that *but* picks out certain features of the foregoing discourse for cancellation, perhaps the presupposition that the teller would prefer to detail the local effects rather than returning to the main point. However, it seems again that the correct description must involve reference to the story-in-progress and directedness toward its organization. In particular, *but* marks the significance statement which serves as the final step in the overall structure of the story. If one felt the description should make reference to the notion of contrast, as above, one could again appeal to the fact that the use of *but* in this way conveys the contrastive information that the complicating action in the body of the narrative here gives way to the coda or final expression of the point of the story.

In the foregoing example *Spade*, *but* (in the extended form *but um*) marked the formulation of the main point of a narrative as its coda, while in the excerpt *Basketball* below, *but um* marks the resolution of the narrative under construction. Again the passage represents the final third of a conversational narrative, which the teller seeks to close with a statement of relevance.

Audrey: {laughing} So, so I went I went in,
 and I had the ball,
 and I just like turned around
 and I shot it-
 didn’t even look
 and it like hit off the backboard so hard.
 It was so bad
 like it I could just like like-
 it was just so embarrassing.

Lana: Oh Audrey.

Audrey: *But, um*,
 I know like it all just paid off
 because my Senior Year
 I’d never done so well in anything.
 And I got a lot of offers
 to play at schools and-

Lana: And you decided not to?

- Audrey: No because,
 my like,
 my whole-
 I don't know why
 but my whole life was geared to like college.
 I could not wait to go to college.
 And to go to a small college,
 Lana: Right, right, right.

A successful statement of relevance can hardly contrast on any higher level of meaning with the preceding discourse, though we might well expect contrasts and/or cancellations on lower levels. Thus, one might say that *but* marks a contrast between the detail level in the foregoing turn to the general level of the final turn. But even in this formulation we perceive an orientation to the function of *but* in relation to the organization of the ongoing narrative.

5.1. But to return to the main theme of a story

The use of *but* to signal a return to the main point or action of a story again parallels *well*. This third DM function of *but* in oral narrative most closely approximates the sequentially contrastive functions identified by earlier writers. By introducing it after the two others, I hope to more clearly show how this function, too, is keyed on the dynamic narrative organization over and above any contrastive functions.

In her story *Patched washcloths*, Lydia twice uses *but* to lead back into her story after interruptions by others, the first time to introduce background information as part of the orientation, and the second time to express evaluation through direct appeal to one of her listeners.

- Lydia: well see I said
 if you grew up in a house
 where your mother [patched washcloths].
 Ned: [remember darning, Sherry?]
 Sherry: I was going-
 “what are *darned* dish towels”.
 Ned: well.
 it's when you don't want to say
 damn dish towels.
 {General laughter}
 don't you call that process darning?
 Lydia: *but* my mother just
 put them under the sewing machine
 and took two washcloths and made one.
 and *patched* the middle of a washcloth
 when it was worn out.
 Ned: your mother didn't invent that. {laughing}

- Lydia: and I said
 when you grow up like *that*
 it's hard to get with this world
 that throws things away.
- Claire: {arriving} here are darned dish towels.
- Sherry: {laughing} *darned* dish towels.
- Lydia: *but* were you ever embarrassed, Claire?
 when you invited *friends* to your house,
 did you ever have to be embarrassed?
 I was embarrassed
 when the girls from town came.
 {Laughter from Sherry, Brandon and others}
- Ned: our mother was embarrassed?
- Lydia: and saw *my* mother's patched washcloths.
 I tried to hide them really fast.

Just as *but* leads back to the main story line following a listener interruption, so may *but* serve to bridge the teller's own digression. For example, in the next excerpt (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 91–92) *um but* returns attention to the main story after a digression by the primary teller herself. Such *buts* might be said to contrast with or cancel the digression, but even then the recognition of certain phrases and exchanges as constituting digressions vis-à-vis the main story line again depends on an adjustment to the dynamic development of the narrative in progress.

- A: the um lunch was all right
 lun- lunch was fairly civilized
 except that I don't know if you can imagine
 having lunch at high table
 in a college
 um an hour before you've got an interview
- b: m
- A: I mean normally I don't eat for three days
 [before an interview]
- c: [yes]
- b, c: {laugh}
- A: *um but* I you lunch one just sort of went into
 and there were all the undergraduates
 at these long tables eating
 and then you clambered up on the platform
 and you took
- b: m
- A: something from a side table
 and you ate it
 and y- when you finished you went away
 and there was no formality

Notice the trouble the teller has in determining her perspective, shifting from *I* to *you* and then to *one*, presumably because she was not sure whether or not she was still in the scenario introduced by ‘I don’t know if you can imagine’ in the turn preceding the digression. Though she moves back to *you* fairly rapidly. These moves, too, reflect a keying to the ongoing narrative performance and to narrative conventions generally.

5.2. But from listener for problems in story organization

As we saw above with *well*, listeners can turn the tables on storytellers, using DMs to draw attention to the organization of the narrative in progress. In the two passages below, listeners resort to the DM *but* to ask questions leading back to the main story line.

In the next excerpt from *Accidents*, Mike exploits the narrative DM function of *but* to induce Jason to return to the expected organizational sequence. When Jason says ‘You met her’, it sounds as if he were already establishing present relevance as in a coda before producing a proper result or resolution. Mike’s question about what happened is perfectly formulated to guide Jason back to the expected result or resolution – though it appears Mike does not possess the information necessary to complete the story.

Jacob: you know what happened to my aunt Florence
when she was a little girl?

Mark: ooh what happened.

Jacob: she was like screwing around
like around Christmas time?
and like she,
I- I guess this was like
when they had candles on trees?
she lit her hair on fire.

Mark: oh wow.

Jacob: you met her.

Mark: *but* did anything happen?
she get a burned head or something?

Jacob: uh I don’t know,
maybe you could shave her
and look for scar tissue.

Mark: oh I don’t want to shave your aunt Florence’s head.

If *but* serves to mark contrast or to cancel any previous meaning or presupposition in this passage, it could only be the assumption that the story will end without a result or resolution. Saying that *but* signals the shift from one speaker to the other or from narrative to questioning the narrative either begs the question or misses the point. Clearly, it is more adequate to say that *but* serves to direct the teller back to the orderly presentation of the story.

In my final example, again taken from the end of a longer story in the London-Lund Corpus (Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 339–340), the teller tacks an additional unexpected observation unto an apparent coda, thereby muddling the point of the narrative for the listeners. At first, the teller seems to be concluding a story about guests at a ball dancing with their winter outerwear on, then he shifts the focus to the effects of the fires in the ballroom, suggesting that he and his partner suffered for their failure to dress warmly enough. Either the clause about the clothing or the clause about the fires and their effects might serve as an appropriate coda to the story in the conversational context, so that one of the listeners formulates a request for the teller to clarify the point of the story, of course initiated with the DM *but*. It is particularly noteworthy, I believe, that both the listener who requested clarification and a second listener as well provide audible back-channels – three in all – while the teller seeks to acquit himself for his failure to properly conclude his story.

- A: in this vast ballroom
uh of the hotel we happened to be in
they were having a Christmas Eve dance.
It's the only time I've ever seen people
at a Christmas Eve dance
wearing gloves and fur coats fur hats.
And there were three enormous fires in the room
which if you were within ten feet of them
you singed
but fifteen feet away from them
it was uh perishing.
- B: *um but* did you not know it was going to be so cold
and you had no fur gloves and fur hats
and things with you
so you nearly died of the cold?
- A: no we'd we'd got clo- uh warm clothes with us
cos we knew,
no it was just surprising that
- B: m
- C: m
- B: m
- A: where I say it was a
a dance going on
with people wearing gloves

The listeners in this passage certainly give the impression of applying pressure on the teller to produce a narrative in the expected order with an unambiguous point; and the teller is at pains to obliterate the unintended inference and to reinforce the image of couples dancing at a ball wearing coats, hats and gloves. Apparently, once the teller has expressed the coda of a story, no related point may rival it until the audience has responded. Since tellers and listeners recognize the function of *but* as a

narrative DM keyed on the organization of stories, both can have recourse to *but* to mark utterances expressing their concern with the form and meaning of narratives.

6. Conclusions

The most immediate conclusion is that both *well* and *but* function as a special sort of DM within the oral narrative context. In fact, the two DMs are surprisingly similar in their specifically narrative applications. In particular, I have argued that both *well* and *but* are keyed on participant expectations about narrative structures and storytelling procedures. I presented excerpts from conversational narratives, showing (1) how *well* and *but* segue from an abstract to an orientation and from the complicating action to a coda and a result or resolution, (2) how *well* and *but* guide listeners back to the main sequence of narrative elements following interruptions and digressions, and (3) how listeners can invoke *well* and *but* in a parallel way to re-orient the primary teller to the expected order of narrative presentation.

More generally, we have seen that DMs can have specialized functions in one particular type of discourse. Since the sequentiality of storytelling differs from that of greetings, question–answer sequences, arguments and other genres of talk, certainly the functions of DMs like *well* and *but* should differ accordingly. I feel that Schiffrin's (1987) description of *well* and *but* in conversation and *so* and *because* in narrative structure clearly lead to this conclusion as well, though she apparently never claimed as much explicitly, perhaps because it detracts from her goal of offering the most general treatment possible of the individual DMs. It seems to me that local sequential determination bound to particular discourse types offers the most compelling evidence available that DMs are genuine *pragmatic* markers à la Fraser (1990) with functions independent of the lexical readings traditionally assigned them. As Schiffrin puts it in her own definition (1987: 31), DMs are “sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk”. Indeed, as I hope to have demonstrated, DMs in oral narratives are elements dependent upon expectations about story structures and conventions and they bracket appropriate units in accordance with the organizational conventions of this genre.

I suggest that we need more research on the local determination of DM functions in different narrative genres in different linguistic communities and storytelling traditions. We should expect to find not only sets of lexical items but also various other linguistic devices acting as DMs. And we should bear in mind that DMs serve not only to signal tellers' intentions about particular utterances and overall organization, but also as cues to audience expectations about the narrative in progress.

Appendix A: Transcription conventions

Each line of transcription contains a single intonation unit.

She's out. Period shows falling tone in the preceding element.

Oh yeah? Question mark shows rising tone in the preceding element.

well, okay	Comma indicates a continuing intonation, drawing out the preceding element.
<i>Damn</i>	Italics show heavy stress.
bu- but	A single dash indicates a cutoff with a glottal stop.
says “Oh”	Double quotes mark speech set off by a shift in the speaker’s voice.
[and so-]	Square brackets on successive lines mark
[Why] her?	beginning and end of overlapping talk.
and=	Equals signs on successive lines shows latching
=then	between turns.
(2.0)	Numbers in parentheses indicate timed pauses.
{sigh}	Curly braces enclose editorial comments and untranscribable elements.

Appendix B: Transcripts

Transcripts of stories from my corpus with notes on their settings and the participants appear below in the order they were treated in the body of the article. In each case, the passage cited above will be bolded.

Dog story

This story was elicited during the first session of a graduate seminar in English at a large midwestern American university. The students were asked to take turns telling stories until each had told two or three. The teller, whom I call Tammy, presented *Dog story* as her first contribution. Others had also related personal narratives, but otherwise no coherence with the context was evident.

Tammy: Well uh,
 I’ve always had a a real interest-
 intrigue, in fact
 with the behavior of animals,
 and and their unique ways of of logic.
 And I guess I got that from my father,
 who, whose family for generations have,
 uh bred foxhounds
 and, hunted with them
 and showed them around the country.
 And through those generations
 they have a lot of networking,
 around the the world,
 really.
 And, there was an instance
 where I got a first hand experience
 in seeing the remarkable nature of animal behavior.
 He ships puppies, foxhounds all over the world.
 Argentina, England, all over.
 And one time
 this man from Florida wanted to buy a matched,
 set of puppies.
 And since I was, uh, off to college

and he needed the money,
 he said, “okay,
 but now I want you to know
 that once you get ’em,
 you have to keep ’em chained,
 for at least six months.
 Not just in a pen, chained”.
 Well, you know this fellow figured
 he knew animal behavior pretty well,
 so he wasn’t going to worry about it.
**So my dad crated-up these two
 beautifully little matched puppies
 and shipped them from Missouri to Florida,
 to this man.**
And reminded him,
“be sure you chain the puppies up”.
Well about, seven eight months later,
here those two dogs return to Missouri.
 The pads were worn off their feet.
 They were haggard.
 They were thin.
 But somehow,
 those puppies had managed
 to get loose from their owner in Florida
 and found their way back to the farm in Missouri,
 where they were born.
 So I think animal behavior is fabulous.

Exposing

This example comes from a set of six forty-five minute segments recorded at the home of Pamela and Teddy with their invited dinner guests Vera and Jim. Vera and Jim are recently married and childless, while Pamela and Teddy have two children. Dinner and dessert are over, the kids are in bed, and the adults are all relating their own childhood memories. When the foursome broke into dyads of two men and two women respectively, Vera overheard Jim mention a letter he wrote to a six-year-old girlfriend. Her question about the letter leads Jim to tell the story *Exposing*.

- Jim: In fact-
 she was the daughter of the woman
 who lived next door to my grandparents.
- Vera: {laughs}
- Jim: And er the couple, y’know.
 So we had such fun as kids
 and and it was she
 and her sister
 to whom I was exposing my brother’s penis
 when my-
- Teddy: {laughs}

- Vera: {laughing} I'm sure yeah.
 Jim: in the famous incident
 when my grandmother *broke* in on us
 and *shamed* me for life.
 Y'know really.
 I'll never forget this tremendous weight of guilt.
 And "*Jim* what are you *doing*".
- Teddy: {laughs}
 Jim: "*Come* out of there"
 y'know "*Girls* go home"
 and y'know.
- Pamela: Wow.
 Jim: Then I remember
 just sitting in the livingroom
 with my grandparents y'know pointedly ignoring me.
- Vera: Trying to act normally.
 Jim: And just y'know making me feel terrible.
 And uh,
- Pamela: Oh.
 Teddy: {laughs}
 Vera: {laughs}
 Jim: But anyhow,
 Vera: He took them in the bathroom
 and *showed* them his brother's.
- Pamela: Oh.
 Jim: {laughs}
 Vera: "*Look* what he's got".
 Jim: My brother didn't mind.
 Vera: Yeah {laughing}
 His brother's younger than him.
- Pamela: Younger.
 Oh I see.
- Jim: Yeah.
 Vera: {laughs}
 Jim: Uh but-
 Vera: {laughing} Poor kid.
- Pamela: Well.
 Vera: "It's a *visual aid*.
 Here's my visual aid".
- Teddy: {laughing} Yes.
 Show and tell.
 Yeah.
 "I'm bringing my brother's *genetalia*".
- Jim: {laughs}
 Vera: {laughs}
 Jim: {laughs}
- Pamela: It sure is nice to have a boy and a girl
 I tell you**
- Teddy: Yeah, yeah.**

- Jim:** Yeah.
Vera: {laughs}
Pamela: We won't have to show them anything.
Jim: [Right right.]
Vera: [That's right.]
Jim: Well I think y'know
 here were two sisters
 who didn't have a brother
 and two brothers who didn't have a sister
 and I think the idea was an exchange of [a kind]
Vera: [You were] being an educator.
Jim: Yeah.
Teddy: Sure.
Jim: But we were *rudely* interrupted and
Vera: {laughs}
Jim: So anyhow uh
 I just got to this cut-off point
 where suddenly
 I had to join the woman-haters' club.

Chipmunk

The participants in this and the next excerpt *Spin out* are Patricia and Ralph, the parents of two college-age daughters Amy and Marsha, who are home for the long Thanksgiving break. The family has remained sitting at the kitchen table after supper. Patricia has been describing a party she attended where she related this same story for the amusement of outsiders, but here the story is told as one familiar to those present.

- Patricia:** and I told the story
 about you and the little chipmunk
 out in the garage.
Marsha: oh. {laughing}
Amy: I kept- I kept-
 I was just thinking about that the other day.
 that thing scared the *heck* out of me.
Patricia: with all with all the:
Amy: it was twice.
Marsha: {laughs}
Amy: it was twice.
 and the first time,
 "there's a rat in there,
 there's a big mouse in there.
 I saw it".
Marsha: {laughs}
Amy: "no, there's nothing in there".
 "yes, I *saw* it".
Marsha: I wouldn't believe her.
Patricia: well I went out.
 remember,
 and set the bag-

**it was a bag of *cans*.
that was when we were looking for the golf ball,
cause you hit the ball in the can.**

Amy: yeah and then you found its little cubby holes
in a box or something.

Patricia: well, what- what-

Marsha: you found all the *seeds*, didn't you?

Patricia: all the seeds.

Ralph: all the seeds in a plastic bag.

Patricia: right by the wood out there.
and when we moved the wood to clean it
there was the whole thing.
it must have sat against the wood
and then ate all the {laughing} [sunflowers.]

Ralph: [all the] sunflower seeds.
all the shells were in [the bag.]

Patricia: [there were] shells everywhere.

Amy: yeah and you guys wouldn't believe me.

Marsha: well I guess there was [something there.]

Patricia: [well I didn't] the first time
but the second time I did.

Amy: scared me both [times.] {laughing}

Marsha: {laughs}

Amy: and of course it happened to me.
you know, nobody else.

Patricia: little sucker was living in the garage

Ralph: living it up.
[and living high on the hog.]

Patricia: [had it made.]
he was in out of the cold
and he had something to eat.
and, and by the way,
we have to get a bird feeder.
I'll have to talk to ma
and go to that Audubon place.

Spin out

Same participants and setting as previous story.

Ralph: so how many cars spun out there,
[counting you.]

Marsha: [three.]
three while we were there. (2.0)
and Brad says
"that's the only thing I have in my defense
that I wasn't driving too fast".

Amy: yeah that's probably the only thing
that's keeping him,

- Marsha: because he does,
he blames himself because-
- Patricia: oh, it's so foolish to blame yourself
and think about it afterwards.
it happened.
it's over.
- Marsha: and then he said he was coming over.
he said "I can't get it out of my mind".
he said "I just keep playing it
over and over and over in my mind".
he said "I can't get it out".
and he doesn't remember too much about it.
- Patricia: you never do,
because it takes *seconds* for it to happen.
- Marsha: he- I can-
he fought the car for a good ten, fifteen seconds
before we lost total control.
- Patricia: well the only thing you can both say
is thank God you're safe.
that's all.
- Amy: did he hit the brakes at all?
- Marsha: no.
he didn't touch the brakes.
- Amy: now see what-
- Patricia: that's where I make *my* mistake.
- Amy: see, I slid a couple times
but I *pumped* the brakes.
that one time, I was coming down a *hill*.
and there was a car stopped at a red-light.
and when I hit the brakes the *first* time,
I slid.
and I was only less than a car-length away from him,
so I just started *slamming* them down.
and I stopped within inches of his bumper.
- Ralph: that doesn't do any good.
slamming them down isn't going to do you any good.
you're going to-
- Amy: yeah but it was=
- Ralph: =it's going to throw you into another skid.
- Amy: yeah, but it was pumping them
and it got me *stopped*.
I mean,
as long as I didn't hit him into the intersection.

Spade

Several graduate students at a large midwestern American university are sitting around a seminar table after class. They have been telling stories about funny incidents from the past.

Woody: yeah I mean the most hilarious thing I ever saw
 as a kid growing up
 was in sixth or seventh grade.
 in sixth or seventh grade
 we lived outside of uh Philadelphia.
 and these two brothers lived across the street.
 Mark and Paul Tulano.
 and they were very loud very Italian young men.
 they were in fifth and sixth grade at the time.
 and uh they were always fighting
 about one thing or another.
 well Paul, my friend,
 uh got stuck with uh digging up the garden
 in the back of the yard with a spade.
 and Mark kept coming around uh to tease him.
 to tease Paul.
 and uh you know, Paul's working with a spade.
 and he says
 "if you don't leave
 I'm going to clunk you over the head,
 with this thing".
 and uh {cough} and Mark's saying
 "there's no way that you're going to be like that,
 because you you just won't do that stuff".
 "I will I will I will".
 so this guy started chasing him,
 kind of like like around the uh
 the patch where the garden was.
 and finally um uh uh his- the younger brother-
 uh Mark just ran off.
 and uh he was-
 he had to have been twenty-five thirty yards away,
 and Paul w- went back with the shovel,
 hurled it.
 I mean y'know just threw it.

Grant,

Ginger: {laugh}

Woody: and I mean what is the likelihood of that thing-
 that damn shovel came right down on [his *head*.]

Grant,

Ginger: {laugh}

Woody: I mean- I mean it came down and it *flattened* him.
 {Woody punctuates with hand clap}
 I mean he fell flat on the ground.
 I mean he had a rip in the back of his head,

Grant: o-oh

Woody: and he thought he was dead.
 and of course he wasn't.
 he was just knocked-out a little bit

**and had a nasty concussion
and so on and so forth.
but um, I mean
who would have thought that that shovel
and that boy
would have connected at that distance.**

Basketball

Lana and Audrey are students, sitting in a university office, talking about how they both ended up studying at this particular place.

Audrey: My Junior Year I didn't play.
And I'd always-
I felt I felt like
I'd just go to the practice
just to help them out-

Lana: Right.

Audrey: But um so
when I really could look down the, the bench,
I'd never want him to look at me
because I knew that he'd put me in.

Lana: Yeah.

Audrey: And I never wanted to go in
because, like I was-
you're playing against these girls
that are like are awesome.
And if you don't-
If you're not, used to playing, them

Lana: Right.

Audrey: you like y-
it's hard to like get into it,
all right?

Lana: Right.

Audrey: So, ha
I looked down the bench
and he like looked at me
and I'm like, "Oh no".
And he goes
okay go in for Erin Potters,
and there's only like a minute left.
And so that's even humiliating at that.

Lana: {laughing} Oh.
I know exactly what you mean.

Audrey: {laughing} So, so I went I went in,
**and I had the ball,
and I just like turned around
and I shot it-
didn't even look**

and it like hit off the backboard so hard.

It was so bad

like it I could just like like-

it was just so embarrassing.

Lana: Oh Audrey.

Audrey: But, um,

I know like it all just paid off

because my Senior Year

I'd never done so well in anything.

And I got a lot of offers

to play at schools and-

Lana: And you decided not to?

Audrey: No because,

my like,

my whole-

I don't know why

but my whole life was geared to like college.

I could not wait to go to college.

And to go to a small college,

Lana: Right, right, right.

Patched washcloths

The source conversation for *Patched washcloths* took place during Thanksgiving dinner at the home of Ned and Claire. Ned's parents Lydia and Frank are present, as are his brother and sister-in-law Brandon and Sherry. Claire and Brandon move back and forth to and from the adjacent kitchen, while the other participants remain seated at the dining room table.

Frank: Grandma Imhof,
she was the stingy one.

Ned: Claire has *darned* dish towels.

Frank: *her* mother did it.
sure.

Lydia: well see I said
if you grew up in a house
where your mother [patched washcloths].

Ned: [remember darning, Sherry?]

Sherry: I was going-
"what are *darned* dish towels".

Ned: well.
it's when you don't want to say
damn dish towels.
{General laughter}
don't you call that process darning?

Lydia: but my mother just
put them under the sewing machine
and took two washcloths and made one.
and *patched* the middle of a washcloth
when it was worn out.

- Ned: your mother didn't invent that. {laughing}
 Lydia: and I said
 when you grow up like *that*
 it's hard to get with this world
 that throws things away.
- Claire: {arriving} here are darned dish towels.
 Sherry: {laughing} *darned* dish towels.
 Lydia: but were you ever embarrassed, Claire?
 when you invited *friends* to your house,
 did you ever have to be embarrassed?
 I was embarrassed
 when the girls from town came.
 {Laughter from Sherry, Brandon and others}
- Ned: our mother was embarrassed?
 Lydia: and saw *my* mother's patched washcloths.
 I tried to hide them really fast.

Accidents

Jacob and Mark share an apartment and study at the local university. The two young men have been discussing how dangerous rough-housing can become, when Mark recalls an accident story his aunt told him. This story in turn reminds Jason of an accident reported about his own aunt.

- Jacob: we've kept everything pretty much under control
 [though this year.]
- Mark: [that's right,]
 you can't wrestle around
 or bad things will happen.
- Jacob: yeah, Roger got [his nose]
- Mark: [you know what] happened
 to my one of my aunt's friends out in Iowa?
 like when- when she was younger,
 she had a headgear from braces,
 and these two girls were wrestling around
 just playing around, wrestling.
 and one girl pulled her headgear off her mouth
 and let it snap back.
 and it slid up her face
 and stuck in her eyes
 and blinded her.
- Jacob: wow.
- Mark: isn't that horrid?
 that's horrid.
- Jacob: [when my-]
- Mark: [blinded her] for life.
 isn't that horrid.
 that's just- I mean just from goofing around,
 just from screwing-

a little bit of screwing around.
 and if- and another thing,
 it- it- it's terrible the things that can happen.
 that's why I don't like people
 screwing around with swords
 and trying to throw people in the showers
 and stuff like that,
 and everything like that.

Jacob: you know what happened to my aunt Florence
 when she was a little girl?

Mark: ooh what happened.

Jacob: she was like screwing around
 like around Christmas time?
 and like she,
 I- I guess this was like
 when they had candles on trees?
 she lit her hair on fire.

Mark: oh wow.

Jacob: you met her.

Mark: but did anything happen?
 she get a burned head or something?

Jacob: uh I don't know,
 maybe you could shave her
 and look for scar tissue.

Mark: oh I don't want to shave your aunt Florence's head.
 does your aunt Florence have like
 spinalbiffera or something like that?

Jacob: I don't know ...

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